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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING IMMEDIATE 7444  
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN IMMEDIATE 1176  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON IMMEDIATE 6042  
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW IMMEDIATE 3170  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS IMMEDIATE 1550  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO IMMEDIATE 6148  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA IMMEDIATE 8165  
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SUBJECT: WOMEN IN INDIA: GOVERNMENT'S PROGRESS GOOD, BUT  
JUST A START

REF: CHENNAI 25

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11. (SBU) Summary. During its five-year tenure, the Congress Party-led ruling coalition, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), has made uneven progress on women's issues. Activists credit the current government with creating an independent Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) and initiating "fairly decent and thoughtful" flagship initiatives. While the political will is present, the GOI has failed to implement programs at the state level due to a lack of capacity and resources. Conflict between the MWCD and the National Commission for Women (NCW), an independent tribunal envisioned as the apex for efforts to protect and promote women's interests, has also impeded progress. Critics slam the Commission as "totally ineffective;" the Commission's tepid response to the highly publicized harassment of female patrons at a Mangalore pub in January only incensed NCW opponents. With parliamentary elections fast approaching, the Congress Party will justifiably tout advancements the UPA government achieved for women; however, to continue the positive trajectory, any newly elected government must devote more resources to state governments for program implementation. Anything less will not make the necessary dent in the slow changing but still deeply ingrained societal mindset limiting the role of women in India. End Summary.

Relentless Renuka  
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12. (U) In January 2006, Renuka Chowdhury successfully upgraded Women and Child Development from a department within the Ministry of Human Resources to its own Ministry. The mandate of the Ministry for Women and Child Development (MWCD) includes reviewing laws to remove gender bias, proposing legislation to promote equal rights, and implementing programs for the social and economic empowerment of women and children. Being a new ministry poses certain challenges for MWCD. Aparna Bhat, an activist and Legal Services attorney, commented that the mandate of MWCD often conflicts with other ministries, which have more clout in the GOI, such as the Home and Labour Ministries. MWCD Joint Secretary for Women's Issues Kiran Chadha told Poloff women's issues often failed to catch the GOI's attention and lamented the lack of awareness and education even within the government.

13. (U) Fortunately, the Ministry has a very vocal woman at

its helm. Dr. Ranjana Kumari, Director of the Centre for Social Research, credits Renuka Chowdhury with increasing MWCD's budget "from one peanut to two peanuts." Other contacts compliment the team Chowdhury has assembled in the Ministry, adding that though Chowdhury lacks depth of knowledge on all issues, she has taken strong stances and trusts her team. Aparna Bhat affirmed that Chowdhury "makes the right noises, at the right time." Contacts credit Chowdhury as the force that has propelled MWCD to become a player, as it pushed Parliament to pass the Violence Against Women Act and other legislation addressing the rights of women in cases of rape and divorce. However, activists have criticized the MWCD for poor mobilization of resources at the state level. J/S Chadha admitted to Poloff that the domestic violence legislation passed two years ago has been slow in implementation, specifically the appropriation of funds by the GOI for the states.

NCW: Toothless Tiger?

14. (SBU) In 1992 the GOI established the National Commission for Women (NCW) to monitor matters relating to legal safeguards for women, review existing legislation, investigate complaints, and provide support to women in need. Girija Vyas, a Congress party loyalist and former MP, joined the commission as Chair in 2005. NCW has five politically-appointed members that control three divisions: complaint and investigation; research; and legislation. The Commission categorizes complaints into 22 areas, including dowry death, harassment, police abuse, and rape. Vyas told Poloffs that the NCW fielded 16,000 complaints in 2008, noting that the highest number of complaints come from Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. Vyas reported the

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NCW also reviewed 54 laws.

15. (SBU) Dr. Kumari credits women's groups for devoting substantial effort to NCW's formation, but blames Vyas for "drowning the Commission," when it could be a "huge power" for Indian women. Multiple contacts echoed the criticism that Vyas is too politically motivated and preoccupied with Congress party infighting. Vyas admitted that she is campaigning for a parliament seat in Rajasthan, which likely consumes much of her time. In her responses to Poloffs' questions on the UPA government's progress on women's issues, Vyas unequivocally praised the Congress party.

16. (SBU) Some activists have dismissed the NCW as a counseling body, dubbing the Commission the "National Counsel for Wives." Vyas defended NCW counseling efforts and identified a recent success story in which the NCW counselor convinced a woman to return to her abusive husband, noting that often communication problems cause the split. She also told Poloffs that the NCW's 2009 motto is "save the family, save the home." Dr. Kumari argues that such counseling is an insult to NCW's founders who envisioned the Commission as a force to lead major policy interventions. She advised that the NCW should fight for increased funding and return to its intended role as the gender lens for the GOI.

17. (SBU) In the wake of the January Mangalore pub attacks during which 40 male Hindu extremists attacked eight women in a pub for drinking in public (Reftel), Indian media lampooned the NCW as a "toothless tiger." NCW's Nirmala Venkatesh led the team sent to investigate the attack and concluded that because the pub had insufficient security, "women have to safeguard themselves." After the public backlash against Venkatesh's findings, the NCW annulled her report and dismissed her on February 27 for dereliction of duty. NCW has not sent another team to Mangalore. The incident provided further ammunition for activists critical of the Commission's effectiveness in advocating on behalf

of the modern Indian woman. Trusted human rights contact Ravi Nair bluntly told Poloff "the NWC is a completely ineffective, shoddy outfit." Aparna Bhat defended the NCW, noting that the Commission employs only 40 staff to investigate cases throughout India and is overwhelmed by the workload.

¶8. (SBU) Contacts divulged that poor coordination between the Commission and the Ministry does not help the situation. J/S Chadha told Poloff that the NCW is "a pain." She likened the Ministry's relationship to the Commission as "setting an immature child free; they run off and never look back." Chadha also regrets the choice of a politician to head the NCW, disparaging Vyas as ineffective and unavailable due to her campaign schedule. Chadha admitted that the NCW lacks adequate resources, but maintained the Commission fails to utilize its current resources. Chadha remarked that the NCW only responds to the Ministry when threatened. In contrast, Vyas told Poloffs that the NCW and MWCD have a "very good" relationship, and the Commission enjoys its autonomy.

UPA Report Card: "Could have been better"

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¶9. (SBU) In its 2008 "Report to the People," the UPA government contends it has given a greater focus to issues relating to women through the creation of an independent Ministry, legislation promoting gender equality, and increased budget allocation for gender-specific programs. NCW Chair Vyas reported the UPA government devoted much more financial resources to women's issues than the previous government. Contacts commend Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government for the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005); amendments prohibiting the arrest of women after sunset; mandates for medical examinations of persons accused of rape; and judicial inquiries into cases of rape while women are in police custody. However, the UPA government failed to gain passage of amendments to the Immoral Traffic Prevention

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Act that has been pending for three years and sexual harassment legislation. J/S Chadha and NCW Chair Vyas both blame the Ministry of Law for the delay in passage.

¶10. (SBU) Ravi Nair summarized the perspective of many contacts, arguing that the UPA's varied initiatives prove it has the political will. However, the coalition does not have the line capacity and machinery in the states to implement the programs. Other contacts criticized the overall lack of coordination. Dr. Kumari contended that the UPA's greatest disappointment has been its failure to pass the Reservation Bill, which would reserve one-third of seats in Parliament for women. The Congress Party pledged to press for the bill in its 2004 Manifesto; however, Kumari claimed that the party became too preoccupied with achieving consensus with regional parties who insisted on reservations for underprivileged groups within the reservations for women. According to women's rights advocates, other failures include not providing a proper budget to implement the domestic violence act. Overall, contacts rate the UPA government's progress as on par with previous governments. Aparna Bhat opined women's issues are always the last priority for every government, not just India's.

Comment - Mobilization and Mindset

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¶11. (SBU) The GOI faces three challenges to true women's empowerment: funding, resource mobilization, and changing the societal mindset. One possible strategy is a large-scale campaign targeting sex selective abortion, dowry deaths, and gender discrimination comparable to the size and scope of the awareness campaign for HIV-AIDS that

has been very successful in India, especially in the southern states. In order for the campaign to impact India's one billion plus population, the GOI must allocate adequate resources for the states, including personnel to mobilize and implement programs. India has made significant progress over the past decade, but changing the deeply ingrained social mindset on the role of Indian women will require a full court press. End Comment.

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